FATHERING AND CHILDREN – THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Robin Sullivan
Children's Commission of Queensland
PO Box 12671
Brisbane Elizabeth Street Qld 4002[1]
Telephone +61 7 3247 5525   Facsimile +61 7 3247 5507

Introduction

Currently there is a public spotlight on men's issues, as changes in gender relationships have led to a questioning of what it is to be a man, and a father in contemporary Australia. We have also, unfortunately, witnessed in the news in recent times, the tragic consequences of desperate men reacting violently to the breakdown of relationships. We are seeing an increasing recognition of the importance of healthy relationships, of the effects of domestic and family violence on children, either as witnesses or victims, and of the costs to men, children, families and society of problematic relationships. Changes in the composition of families and in the workforce through increased unemployment for men and increasing rates of employment for women have also been part of the public debate over the well-being of children. The rapid social change which is affecting all aspects of our lives includes an increase in the number of children who do not have a male figure consistently in their lives.

In the last few years, much has been written on the role of men in our society. Yet, men as fathers is a comparatively new area of study (Evans u.d.). Changing concepts of fatherhood, and the implications for children, are currently embedded in a debate "fueled by the diverse interests of those associated with the feminist movements, men's rights organizations, gay/lesbian organizations, and the new right" (Marsiglio 1995 p.20). It is increasingly difficult to separate myth from reality, research from rhetoric.

This paper aims to clarify some of the key issues in the field, by exploring the concepts of "father" and "fathering" and the sources of information that impact on our construction of these concepts. It will draw on a range of recent research and writings in Australia and the United States, before explaining how this information has been used to frame the Commission's Focus on Fathering project.

The Concept Of Father Today

> *What is a father, a real father? What is the meaning of that great word? What is the immensely great idea behind that name?*

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1880, *The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted in Webb 1998, p.43.)

We will start by exploring definitions of what it is to be a father. Today, like most aspects of fathering, even the definition of "father" is contested, on theoretical, pragmatic and moral and ethical grounds. Such contestation is an integral part of discussion in this area, and the existence of divergent and conflicting views must be acknowledged as a starting point for any fathering project. Tanfer and Mott (1997) for example assert:

> *A man becomes a father when he has his first child; [and] ... once a man becomes a father he is always a father.*

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When we consider approaches to pregnancy such as in-vitro fertilisation, however, we can see that notions of biological fatherhood are problematic.

In trying to clarify terminology, Tanfer and Mott (1997) distinguish between "fatherhood" as a status attained by having a child, and "fathering" which includes the procreative act and all the childrearing roles that fathers may fulfil. Yet, later, they acknowledge that changes in family structure have meant that these concepts now include non-biological fathers as well. As Bachrach and Sonenstein (1998) point out:

> *Men are now more likely than ever before to live separately from their children and to father outside of marriage. Many men experience fatherhood as a sequence of relationships with children, some biologically theirs and some the children of spouses or partners.*

This growing diversity of relationships between men and children means that a decreasing proportion of children live with their biological fathers, many have stepfather figures, and there is an increasing number of custodial single fathers (Day et al. 1998). Some relevant Australian statistics include:

- 53 per cent of divorces involve children under 18
- 19.3 per cent of all families with children under 15 are headed by a lone female
- 1.9 per cent of all families with children under 15 years are headed by a lone male
- In 32.9 per cent of all marriages at least one partner has had a previous marriage (ABS 2000)

We argue then that the concept of "social fatherhood" is more meaningful than biological fatherhood, where "social fatherhood … includes all the child rearing roles, activities, duties and responsibilities that fathers are expected to perform and fulfil" (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998), and this does not limit the relationship to one based on biology.

The Concept Of Fathering Today

Being a father is challenging in contemporary Australia (Department of Family and Community Services 1999 p.vii). Many factors shape the way fatherhood is perceived and fathers behave. Cultural images of fatherhood include both stereotypes and ideal images (Marsiglio 1995 p.3), as well as some not-so-ideal images.

Let us explore some of these images, starting with those portrayed on that pervasive medium, television. As Bernard Zuel (1999) pointed out in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, thirty years ago *"Father Knows Best* was not just a title, it was a way of life". For those too young to be familiar with this American program, it featured Robert Young as the "quintessential all-knowing father". As an aside, you may be aware that this "perfect" family lived in the town of Springfield, the same town inhabited by a well-known current cartoon family.

With shows like *My Three Sons*, *Bonanza*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies* it was the mothers who were absent. Moving to the 70s, we had *The Brady Bunch*, featuring an harmonious blended family, where Mike Brady calmly and effortlessly always had the answers.

But if we look at comparable television shows now, we find images of "the dead-head dads, the ones setting a bad example through sloth, gluttony, lust, avarice and more" (Zuel 1999). Homer Simpson of course springs to mind – a funny figure, a weak man, a pitiful parent.

Some see the changing role of fathers as strongly associated with the women's movement, a consequence of women moving into the workforce in great number and putting pressure on

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their partners to share the housework and child care. The absence of the father in *Murphy Brown* reflected the notion that women do not need to be attached to a man to be valued, but can live full lives in their own right.

There are also shows such as *Party of Five* where there are children but no parents at all. A family circumstance they have in common with the highly popular character in children's novels, Harry Potter. Increasingly, we are seeing an emergence of shows which reflect a quite different notion of family – where there are no children and no parents – shows like *Friends* and *Suddenly Susan* where there is a surrogate family consisting only of friends.

Are these images of fathers a reflection of life today? Were the programs of the past a reflection of how it really was back then? Many of the new fathering books appear to be based on "… a longing to return to a pre-feminist historical period: a mythological age where men were warriors and gods …" (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998 p.94). However, no amount of longing can make such a world happen, and such approaches offer little to help us understand contemporary gender and paternal relations. Boys and young men now live in complex cultural contexts where experiences of what it is to be a male and a father are rich and diverse.

There are conflicting trends which need to be considered in developing an understanding of contemporary fathering (Tanfer and Mott 1997). Consider the following words, some of which are from young people themselves:

> *One time I had an assembly and I was a soloist and my dad was in the first row and after my song I smiled at my dad and my dad smiled back and started crying. That was the best thing I ever saw* (6th grader, Fathering Research website http://www.fathers.com/1999research/essays.html).

> *If you're upset, don't take it out on us. We are not as strong as you think we are. If you're yelling at us we might be acting tough on the outside, but inside, deep inside, we might be crying a river* (Girl, 12, from Snow, M. :Take Time to Play Checkers, quoted in Seeds of Change volume 3).

> *I remember feeling very strongly, that I had to be quiet. That everything I said kept getting my mother beaten. ... So, I shut down and stopped talking, stopped laughing, because periodically, out of the blue, mother would get beaten for, I don't know what. So, I learned to walk on eggs and I became a very sad child* (excerpt from "Secret Wounds" included on Domestic Violence Resource Centre Factsheet).

> *Did you know for years I thought that I was protecting my little sisters. He would tell me if I let him do it to me then he wouldn't touch my little sisters. I hated him ... He used me from when I was eight until I was fifteen. Twenty years later I found he was doing it to all of us* (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Domestic Violence p.9).

These images that appear in the news and in various other media are also part of contemporary constructions of fathering. When we try to pinpoint fathering behaviour, we find that, on the one hand, there are men who increasingly view children and fatherhood as an unnecessary and unwanted responsibility, as evidenced in the absent fathers and those who offer no support to their children. Images of fatherhood are also tainted by an increasing public awareness of domestic violence and of the incidence of fathers' sexual abuse of children (Marsiglio 1995 p.4). A film like Tim Roth's *The War Zone* certainly would not have been made a decade ago.

On the other hand, there are men who emphasise the importance of relationships with children as a source of meaning and happiness (Tanfer and Mott 1997). This image from the promotional material supporting Queensland's new Child Protection Act is reflective of this emphasis. This trend is evidenced in men's groups' advocating for changes in law and work customs which would provide more opportunities for men to spend time with their children. It was also a strong theme at the Men and Family Relationships Forum held in Canberra in 1998 where, in his summary of the Forum's themes, Bob Montgomery identified the importance of opportunities for men, women and children to learn relationship skills.

If we turn now to how fathering is constructed in the literature, it is not surprising that a strong theme is the role confusion experienced by men today, caused by a lack of an adequate role model in their own lives (the "distant dad") and by changes in the roles adopted by women through their increased participation in the workforce and an increased expectation that men will be more involved in the home and family life. For example, in research involving 350 Australian men, Townsend (1994 p.164) found that the term 'head of the household' – the "patriarch and provider" role has almost disappeared – but there is no term that has replaced it which captures the role of men in the family today.

How do men think they learn to be fathers? According to a recent study of 1000 Australian fathers, 'observing and listening to his own father' was the most commonly mentioned source of learning how to be a father (Department of Family and Community Services 1999 p. 36). In contrast, Daly (1995) found that the 32 fathers he interviewed identified their own fathers as deserving of their respect, and as "influential" in their own fathering behaviour – but it was through being the *antithesis* of who they wanted to be as fathers. Rather than specific figures or images that they wanted to emulate, these men identified actions or values as being influential on their own behaviour, and indicated that these came from fathering peers or the advice of a mother or wife in a fragmented rather than an holistic way. Factors like socioeconomic and ethnic background also affect men's experiences and the images of fathering that shape their own behaviour as a father.

From these sources, a clear theme emerges: there is no simple and unequivocal answer to the question "What do we mean by 'fathering' today?". As roles and relationships are continually being negotiated and renegotiated, individual men need to explore their own understandings of what it is to be a father today, and this is not an easy task. This also means that any programs that are developed to support men as fathers should acknowledge the range of ways that men actually "father".

Fathers And Children
In recent years, the body of writing highlighting the crucial role that fathers play in their children's lives has increased. Sometimes this is couched in alarmist terms, with strong images that appeal to our emotions, for example:

> *On almost every indicator of child well-being, children today fare worse than their counterparts just a generation ago. The reason: the dramatic rise, over the last thirty years, in the number of children living in fatherless households. (from the National Fatherhood Initiative website: http://www.fatherhood.org/about-us.html).*

I would argue that both points in this statement are open to question and would consider it advisable to seek supporting evidence before accepting either. But I draw your attention to this extract as it exemplifies how important it is to separate out myth from reality, and to look to research to inform our work. In fact, reviews of research have fairly consistently stated:

> *While it would be a seemingly obvious proposition to most of us, that fathers' consistent and substantial involvement in child care would benefit the child, this appears to have not been well established (*Tanfer and Mott 1997 p.4).

A great danger lies in making assumptions about causal relationships as this extract tempts us to:

> *The problem of father absence has been well documented, both in numbers that capture the scope of the problem and in a range of negative outcomes that reflect the deep psychological trauma experienced by the children --- and the high cost to society. Father absence is strongly associated with high rates of school failure and drop-out, early sexual activity and teen pregnancy, youth suicide, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality* (Erickson 2000, p.1*).*

What Erickson has failed to note here (though she does later) is that father absence "has striking economic consequences for the children" (ibid p.2). And of course, poverty is strongly related to "high rates of school failure and drop-out," and the other negative outcomes for young people identified in the above quote. Is it the father absence that is the crucial factor for these negative outcomes, or is it the resulting economic hardship? Separating these confounding factors poses a real challenge for researchers in this area, though the "Father Presence Matters Library" (2000) states that "The consensus in the literature is that the economic hardship of many single mothers seriously restricts the educational, health, and occupational opportunities for their children".

Can it be that *The Responsible Fatherhood Act of 1999* introduced to the U.S. Congress in November last year was based on an understanding of this research finding? This Act is part of President Clinton's Responsible Fatherhood initiative with one of its main objectives to 'encourage' non-paying non-custodial fathers, referred to as 'dead beat dads', to pay child support. Initiatives include: car booting, which I presume is something like wheel clamping, as it immobilises vehicles until owners begin to pay what they owe; intercepting gambling winnings; denying passports to parents who owe $2,500 or more; prohibiting medicare participation by providers, that is doctors and other health providers, owing child support; and requiring states to update more frequently child support orders (US Department of Health and Human Services 2000).

A recent Australian manifestation of this debate was evidenced in the media with both support for and criticism of Alison Rich's soon to be published monograph on sole parent families and educational disadvantage (Rich in press).

When Russell and his colleagues (Department of Family and Community Services 1999 p.22) summarised key findings of research into the effects of father involvement, they found that there was no one set of positive behaviours that led to children's well-being,

> *Rather, a successful father, as defined in terms of his children's development, is one whose role performance matches the demands and prescriptions of his sociocultural and familial context."*

Unfortunately there are many problems with research about fathering, including conceptualising, sampling and methodological issues. Here I would like to focus on just one – whose views are being sought in the research?

Marsiglio (1995 p.13) points out that much of the sociological research has relied on mothers' reports of fathers' attitudes and behaviours, though there is a growing amount of research exploring the beliefs and perceptions of fathers themselves. Even fathers' self-

report data needs to be questioned as there is evidence, for example, that they report providing more financial support than mothers report receiving.

As research in the area becomes more sophisticated and extensive, it is likely that our views of the role that fathers play in the development of the child will change. Paul Amato, for example, who earlier in his career, argued that children were not necessarily negatively affected by divorce, has in recent years completed research which has changed his mind. At the Men and Family Relationships Forum in Canberra in 1998, in his keynote address he reported on a meta-analysis he undertook of 54 existing studies of nonresident fathers and children. He found that children's academic success was not linked to the amount or frequency of contact between the child and their father. It was however positively correlated with the amount of child support the absent father gave, the emotional bonding between father and child, and an authoritative parenting style being adopted by the father. This analysis goes some way towards helping us understand the complexity of the effect of fathers on the well-being of the child.

The Voices Of Children
When we stand back and look at the research, what is largely missing are the voices of children themselves. It is one thing for present-day adults to reflect back on what things were like when they were children, but to understand father-child relationships today, we need to also hear the views of those who are now children themselves.

Here are a couple of cartoons that have a light hearted look at the views of young people (see attached pages).

All too often, researchers or respondents speak *for* children, but as Berry Mayall (1996) questions:

> *If one is not a child, can one and should one attempt to understand and convey what children's experiences are? … Researching children and childhood can look like and often has looked like the study of a strange tribe, of non-persons, on whom, however, great hopes are based, as the next generation of adults* (Mayall 1996 p.1).

Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) identifies the need for children's views to be heard. It states that:

> *State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child …* (UNCROC)

Giving children a "voice" "means more than recording their views; it means attending to them and taking them seriously … Until recently, children as reporters and witnesses have tended to be excluded from empirical research studies, which have instead used mothers as informants on their children" (Mayall 1996 pp.12-13).

There have, however, been two recent studies into the nature of fathering which have sought the views of children, one in Australia and one in New Zealand. In the Australian study, Russell and his colleagues used children's drawings to determine how fathers are constructed by their children in order to obtain a better picture of the 'basic social arrangements' of families. This method was chosen as there is a strong tradition in families of visually recording family activities through photographs and videos and also because it is recognised

that children's drawings reflect their experiences of the world to the point that they are sometimes used as diagnostic tools. Some of the drawings are included here.

The New Zealand study, the *Children's Views on Fathering* Project, used a range of methods including drawings, semi structured interviews, story writing and focus group discussions to see how children of different ages see fathers' roles and responsibilities (Hendricks 1998). Some children and young people identified 'okay' and 'not okay' characteristics of fathers and generally children of all ages displayed an awareness of potential influences on father's behaviour, including factors affecting fathers' emotions and factors restricting fathers' ability to spend more time with their children (Hendricks 1998).

In its work, the Children's Commission of Queensland seeks to facilitate the voices of children. As part of its Focus on Fathering project, the Children's Commission is working with all schools in Queensland to explore the perceptions children hold of their fathers or those they consider a father figure. Through a state-wide competition, students will be encouraged to share their ideas in words or in pictures. It is anticipated that the responses to this activity will help us understand more fully the roles of fathers in Queensland through this insight into the views of their children.

Conclusion

Two main themes emerge from this paper. Firstly, although much has been written in recent times about men as fathers, we still have much to learn about the relationships between fathers and children. It appears from the above analysis that there is a need for more research which explores the views of children.

It also appears that there is a need for writing in the area to acknowledge the tensions that exist among different images of men as fathers, from the new-age carer, to the uninvolved individual, to the tyrant or aggressor. This indicates that the support that is offered men as fathers should be diverse and flexible if it is to meet the range of their needs.

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